

## NEWS IS DUMB AND MAKING US DUMBER

News makes us dumb by dissecting reality, leaving the public with no idea of what to make of our times, says a University of Florida history professor and author of a new book.

Other writers have criticised media bias, incompetence and irresponsibility; but in this book, *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society*, C. John Sommerville takes a different tack, targetting the essential feature of news: its timeliness, which has degraded into a daily and often hourly barrage of disassociated facts.

"The news began making us dumber when we insisted on having it daily," Sommerville says. "Now we've lost our ability to discern truly significant news."

"Because newspapers and news broadcasts treat each day and its events as being equally important in giving us daily installments, the reading, viewing and listening public fail to develop a sense of perspective about the bigger issues."

"The world hasn't always had a news industry," he says. "The news used to come irregularly when something happened that was really important or interesting. The only reason for making the news daily is to create an information industry. If publishers waited for something to hap-



pen, they might be idle for weeks and their capital assets would get rusty. So they have convinced us that every day is worthy of the same attention."

Paradoxically, the media are not the villains in these developments, he emphasises.

"Ultimately, it is the consumers of news who are to blame," says Sommerville. "We have acquired an addiction, and newspapers are just supplying the market." (Source: By Cathy Keen, April 1999 press release from the University of Florida, USA, website, <[www.ufl.edu](http://www.ufl.edu)>; see also <[www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com)>)

## STUDY QUESTIONS NEW PROZAC-LIKE DRUGS FOR CHILDREN

Researchers recently questioned the widespread use of Prozac-like drugs to treat mild or moderate mental illness in children, despite lack of scientific evidence about their safety or effectiveness.

In the USA alone, more than 500,000 prescriptions a year are written for the newest class of anti-depressant drugs—serotonin-selective re-uptake inhibitors, or SSRIs—without scientific evidence of the drugs' safety and effectiveness in children, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill researcher Jerry Rushton said.

"Our survey data suggest that despite a lack of research support, adequate training and comfort with

the management of depression, SSRIs are gaining physician acceptance and becoming incorporated into primary care practice," Rushton said in a statement released by the university.

Rushton, who presented results of a survey of physicians' prescription practices to a paediatric medical conference in San Francisco, said SSRIs now account for 69 per cent of prescriptions written to treat childhood depression.

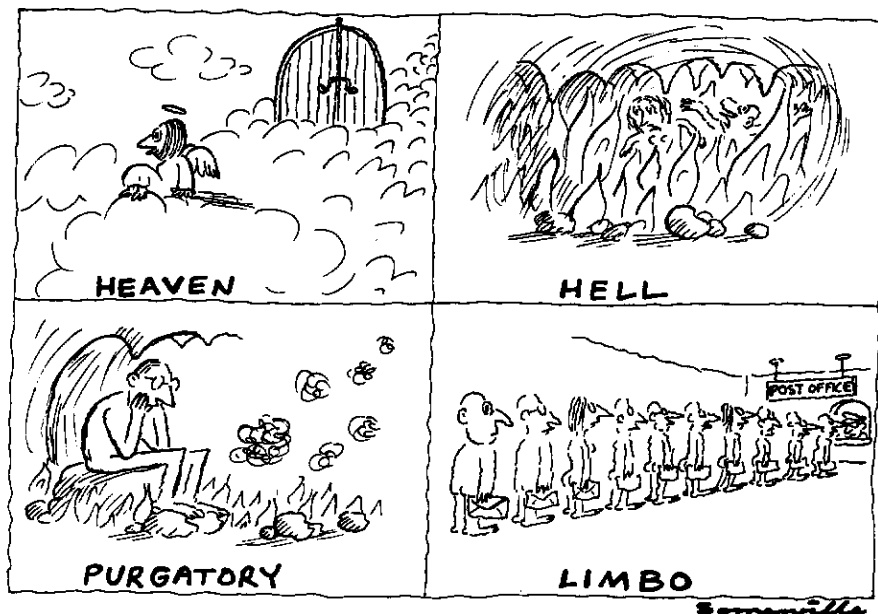
He said Prozac, the most commonly prescribed SSRI for children, may be following Ritalin as the drug of choice in the controversial treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Approved by the Food and Drug Administration for patients over 18 years of age, SSRIs also are being prescribed for children to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder, aggression-conduct disorder and even bed-wetting, he said.

Rushton warned that the effects of "psychoactive" drugs like SSRIs on developing central nervous systems are still unknown, and the drugs have been documented to cause sleep disturbances and behavioural changes in children.

"I think these medications are starting to show promise," he said. "However, they should be used with caution and monitored closely, not used haphazardly for transient symptoms; not for school problems or nebulous behavioural problems."

(Source: Press release, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, via Reuters, 2 May 1999)



## PESTICIDES & HERBICIDES ARE POISONING EUROPE

Rainwater is not what it used to be. A new study reveals that much of the precipitation in Europe contains such high levels of dissolved pesticides, that it would be illegal to supply it as drinking water.

Studies in Switzerland have found that rain is laced with toxic levels of atrazine, alachlor and other commonly used crop sprays.

"Drinking water standards are regularly exceeded in rain," says Stephan Müller, a chemist at the Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science and Technology in Dübendorf.

The chemicals appear to have evaporated from fields and become part of the clouds.

Both the European Union and Switzerland have set a limit of 100 nanograms for any particular pesticide in a litre of drinking water. But, especially in the first minutes of a heavy storm, rain can contain much more than that.

In a study to be published by Müller and his colleague Thomas Bucheli in *Analytical Chemistry* this summer, one sample of rainwater contained almost 4,000 nanograms per litre of 2,4-dinitrophenol, a widely used pesticide.

Previously, the authors had shown that in rain samples taken from 41 storms, nine contained more than 100 nanograms of atrazine per litre, one of them around 900 nanograms.

In the latest study, the highest concentrations of pesticides turned up in the first rain after a long dry-spell, particularly when local fields had recently been sprayed. Until now, scientists had assumed that the pesticides only infiltrated groundwater directly from fields.

Müller warns that the growing practice of using rainwater that falls onto roofs to recharge underground water may be adding to the danger. This water often contains dissolved herbicides that have been added to roofing materials, such as bitumen sheets, to prevent vegetation growing.

He suggests that the first flush of rains should be diverted into sewers to minimise the pollution of drinking water which is not usually treated to remove these herbicides and pesticides.

Meanwhile, Swedish researchers have linked pesticides to one of the most rapidly increasing cancers in the Western world.

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which has risen by 73 per cent in the US since 1973, is probably caused by several commonly used crop sprays, say the scientists.

Lennart Hardell of Orebro Medical Centre and Mikael Eriksson of Lund University Hospital found Swedish sufferers of the disease were 2.7 times more likely to have been exposed to MCPA, a widely used weedkiller, than healthy people (*Cancer* 85:1353). (MCPA, which is used on grain crops, is sold as Target by the Swiss firm Novartis.) In addition, patients were 3.7 times more likely to have been exposed to a range of fungicides—an association not previously reported.

The patients were also 2.3 times more likely to have had contact with glyphosate, the most commonly used herbicide in Sweden. Use of this chemical, sold as Round-Up by the US firm Monsanto, is expected to rocket with the introduction of crops such as Roundup-Ready soya beans that are genetically modified to resist glyphosate.

The researchers suggest that the chemicals have suppressed the patients' immunity, allowing viruses such as Epstein-Barr to trigger cancer.

(Source: By Fred Pearce and Debora Mackenzie, *New Scientist*, 31 March 1999, <www.newscientist.com>)

## LINK BETWEEN SOLAR CYCLE AND EARTH'S CLIMATE

Variations in the energy given off by the Sun affect the Earth's wind patterns and thus the climate of the planet, according to results of a new study published in *Science* (9 April 1999). For decades, scientists have tried to understand the link between winds and temperature and the Sun and its cycles. There were tell-tale signs of a connection. For instance, the "little ice age"

recorded in Europe between 1550 and 1700 happened during a time of very low solar activity.

According to Drew Shindell, a climate researcher from NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York City and lead author of the new study, a key piece of the puzzle was missing. Previous studies neglected to take into account the effects of increased solar activity on the ozone layer or the complex chemistry of the upper atmosphere where most of the high-energy radiation, including ultra-violet radiation (the kind responsible for creating the ozone layer) gets absorbed.

"When we added the upper atmosphere's chemistry into our climate model, we found that during a solar maximum, major climate changes occur in North America."

The changes, according to Shindell, are caused by stronger westerly winds. Changes also occur in wind speeds and directions all over the Earth's surface.

"Solar variability changes the distribution of energy," said Shindell. "Over an 11-year solar cycle, the total amount of energy has not changed very much. But where the energy goes changes as wind speeds and directions change."

(Source: News release, NASA/Goddard Spaceflight Center, <www.gsfc.nasa.gov>, <www.sciencedaily.com>, 12 April 1999)



**AUSTRALIA'S HIGH COURT DISMISSES CHALLENGES TO INCOME-TAX LAW**

The High Court has categorically put paid to claims by "fringe" political groups that a raft of Australian law, including the Income Tax Assessment Act, is unconstitutional.

The Court dismissed five cases seeking to argue that the Federal Government's income-tax law was invalid. The cases claimed that all laws passed since Australia signed the Treaty of Versailles after the end of World War I were passed illegally. They also claimed that amendments to the title of "Queen of Australia" meant that no laws have been validly passed since 1973.

In all five cases before the High Court, it was argued that there has been an unremedied, perhaps even irremediable, "break in sovereignty" in Australia—that leads to the conclusion that some (perhaps much) legislation passed by the Parliament of the Commonwealth, or one or more State Parliaments, is apparently invalid.

In dismissing the cases, the High Court said: "The written arguments that have been submitted (and supplemented orally) are not always articulated clearly and logically.

"None of the applicants identifies a point having sufficient merit to warrant removal of the cause concerned into this Court. The points that it sought to agitate are not arguable."

(Source: The Taxation Examiner, March-April 1999, p. 3.

**THE KOSOVO MINES: A REASON FOR INVASION?**

*[Given the events of the last few months, and enormous reader interest in possible 'hidden motives' relating to the crisis in the Balkans, we feel this item published last year could go some way towards explaining things. Ed.]*

Wars are, at root, about economics, and the rapidly expanding war in Kosovo appears no different. Why have millions of dollars in high-tech weapons suddenly become available to the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army by way of the US and Germany?

A report by *New York Times* Balkans bureau chief Chris Hedges (11 July 1998) describes the KLA's new arsenal: the latest anti-tank rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft weapons. These weapons are shifting the balance of power toward the KLA, which is funded fully by outside sources, mostly from the US and Germany. In fact, the KLA is primarily a mercenary army funded by the kind of shadowy sources that have long been associated with US and German intelligence services.

On 8 July the *New York Times* carried an article by Chris Hedges on the real wealth of Kosovo: the Stari Trg mining complex.

Hedges' visit to the Stari Trg mining complex is an eye-opener. "The sprawling state-owned Trepca mining complex, the most valuable piece of real estate in the Balkans, is worth at least US\$5 billion," writes Hedges.

According to the mine's director, Novak Bjelic, "The war in Kosovo is about the mines, nothing else. This is Serbia's Kuwait—the heart of Kosovo... In addition to all this, Kosovo has 17 billion tons of coal reserves."

Hedges

describes the mining complex: "The Stari Trg mine, with its warehouses, is ringed with smelting plants, 17 metal treatment sites, freight yards, railroad lines, a power plant and the country's largest battery plant."

Lignite deposits in the Kosovo mines are, according to experts, sufficient for the next 13 centuries. The capacity of the lead and zinc refineries ranks third in the world.

Although the average person watching the news in the evening has never heard of Stari Trg, it has been a prize changing hands for two thousand years.

The most important words in Hedges' article are the description of the complex as "state-owned".

Throughout this decade, socialist Yugoslavia has attempted to resist privatisation of its industry and natural resources. As a result, this huge complex of mines, refining, power and transportation in Kosovo may well be the largest uncontested piece of wealth not yet in the hands of the big capitalists of the US or Europe.

The industry, natural resources and transportation of all the former Soviet republics, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the secessionist republics of Yugoslavia are now being rapidly privatised. The major Western corporations are gobbling up these industries.

While the fate of some industries is still in negotiation, the lending and credit conditions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank require the break-up of all state-owned industries. This is true for the oil and natural gas wealth in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, as well as for the diamond mines of Siberia.

The decision on who will own or have controlling interest in the 22 mines and the many processing plants of the Trepca complex will be made by whoever wins the armed struggle raging in Kosovo. NATO domination on the ground would put US corporations in the best ownership position. Nationalist strife advances their position.

Although being forced to privatise in order to survive in today's global market, Yugoslavia has tried to control the process and to propose Balkan regional development.

(Source: Written by Sara Flounders, reprint - ed from Workers World newspaper, 30 July 1998; 55 W. 17 St, New York, NY 10011, USA, e-mail <www@workers.org>, website <http://www.workers.org>)



## EXPOSURE TO PESTICIDES LINKED TO HYPERACTIVITY

For the past 25 years, tens of millions of people in hundreds of cities and towns have been drinking tap water that is contaminated with low levels of insecticides, weed-killers and artificial fertilisers. They not only drink it, they also bathe and shower in it, thus inhaling small quantities of farm chemicals and absorbing them through the skin. Naturally, the problem is at its worst in agricultural areas.

The most common contaminants are carbamate insecticides (aldicarb and others), the triazine herbicides (atrazine and others) and nitrate nitrogen. For years, government scientists have tested each of these chemicals individually at low levels in laboratory animals—searching mainly for signs of cancer—and have declared each of them an "acceptable risk" at the levels typically found in groundwater.

Now a group of biologists and medical researchers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, led by Warren P. Porter, has completed a five-year experiment putting mixtures of low levels of these chemicals into the drinking water of male mice and carefully measuring the results. They reported recently that combinations of these chemicals—at levels similar to those found in the groundwater of agricultural areas of the United States—have measurable detrimental effects on the nervous, immune and endocrine (hormone) systems (*Toxicology and Industrial Health*, vol. 15, nos 1&2, 1999). Furthermore, they say their research has direct implications for humans.

Dr Porter and his colleagues point out that the nervous system, the immune system and the endocrine (hormone) system are all closely related and in constant communication with each other. If any one of the three systems is damaged or degraded, the other two may be adversely affected. The Wisconsin researchers therefore designed their experiments to examine the effects of agricultural chemicals on each of the three systems simultaneously.

To assess immune system function, they measured the ability of mice to make antibodies in response to foreign proteins. To assess endocrine system function, they measured thyroid hormone levels in the blood. And to assess nervous system function they measured aggressive behaviour in the presence of intruder mice introduced into the cages. They also looked for effects on growth by measuring total body weight and the weight of each animal's spleen.

The experiments were replicated many

times to make sure the results were reproducible. They found effects on the endocrine system (thyroid hormone levels) and immune system, and reduced body weight from mixtures of low levels of aldicarb and nitrate, atrazine and nitrate, and atrazine, aldicarb and nitrate together. They observed increased aggression from exposure to atrazine and nitrate, and from atrazine, aldicarb and nitrate together.

The Wisconsin research team wrote: "Of particular significance in the collective work of Boyd and others, Porter and others, and our current study is that *thyroid hormone concentration change* was consistently a response due to mixtures, but *not* usually to individual chemicals." In the five-year experiment, thyroid hormone levels rose or fell depending upon the mixture of farm chemicals put into the drinking water.

Dr Porter and his colleagues present evidence from other studies, showing that numerous farm chemicals can affect the thyroid hormone levels of wildlife and humans. PCBs and dioxins can have similar effects, they note. Proper levels of thyroid hormone are essential for brain development of humans prior to birth. Some, though not all, studies have shown that attention deficit and/or hyperactivity disorders in children are linked to changes in the levels of thyroid hormone in the blood. Children with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) have abnormal thyroid levels. Furthermore, irritability and aggressive behaviour are linked to thyroid hormone levels.

A recent study of four- and five-year-old children in Mexico specifically noted a decrease in mental ability and an increase in aggressive behaviour among children exposed to pesticides (*Environmental*

*Health Perspectives* 106(6):347-353, June 1998). Elizabeth A. Guillette and colleagues studied two groups of Yaqui Indian children living in the Yaqui Valley in northern Sonora, Mexico. One group of children lives in the lowlands dominated by pesticide-intensive agriculture (45 or more sprayings each year), and the other group lives in the nearby upland foothills where their parents make a living by ranching without the use of pesticides. The pesticide-exposed children had far less physical endurance in a test to see how long they could keep jumping up and down; they had inferior hand-eye coordination; and they could not draw a simple stick figure of a human being, which the upland children could readily do.

Notably, in the Guillette study we find this description of the behaviour of pesticide-exposed children: "Some valley children were observed hitting their siblings when they passed by, and they became easily upset or angry with a minor corrective comment by a parent. These aggressive behaviors were not noted in the [pesticide-free upland] foothills [children]."

This is a time when Americans are searching for the causes of violence in their society. No one seems to be asking whether pesticides, fertilisers and toxic metals are affecting our young people's mental capacity, emotional balance and social adjustment. From the work of Warren Porter, Elizabeth Guillette and others, it is apparent these are valid questions.

(Source: By Peter Montague, Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly, no. 648, 29 April 1999, Environmental Research Foundation, USA, tel (410) 263 1584, fax (410) 263-8944, e-mail <erf@rachel.org>, website <www.monitor.net/rachel/>)

